

Language Course Guide

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If you are someone who is learning or thinking of learning a language so you can communicate with people abroad, this is for you. You may be completely new to language learning, you may have “done” a language a long time ago, at school perhaps, or possibly already be enrolled in beginner level classes. This guide outlines what is involved in adult education language learning and will be of interest if you about to embark on a language course and are unsure of what to look for or what to expect of a course and wonder how it might differ from your schoolboy or schoolgirl language experience. Here you'll also find an outline of things to consider before choosing a course.

Learning a language as an adult

What to expect and how to choose or evaluate a course

If you are beginning or re-beginning a language course as an adult having “done” a language at school you will find that everything about the experience is different, starting from the moment you arrive in the classroom.

Learning in progress – the classroom

In school language classes we used to sit in rows of desks facing the teacher and not facing our fellow students. There are some practical reasons for this as any teacher will tell you, such as having to fit a lot of students into a classroom and keep an eye on them, but what this means is that while every student can look at and listen to the teacher and vice versa, students can't talk or listen to each other.

If you think about it, this is not a very good idea because when you are learning a language for communication purposes, you need to practise speaking as much as possible and talk to as many people as possible. Normally when you are talking to some-one you can watch their face or hand gestures to get extra clues about what they are saying, and they can do the same with you. You can help each other along if need be, because you will see when some-one hasn't understood, or when you've said something that's not clear. So it's not very helpful to have your back to some-one! Adult education language classes, unlike schoolrooms, are usually arranged so that everyone can see and talk to each other and to the teacher.

Learning a new language – talking or writing?

Nearly everyone who has joined my language classes as an adult says their main aim is to be able to talk to and understand people they meet in the country where the language is spoken. No one has ever yet said to me that their main aim is to read and write in the language. In fact a lot of people actually say they don't want to do much reading and writing, only “conversation”. This changes a bit for more advanced learners, of course or if you go to the country a lot and speak quite well, but want to be able to write letters and such-like in a professional manner. In these cases you will be looking for a class that reflects this interest.

It's important to realise that, as many of us have found out the hard way, there is a very big difference between understanding spoken language and speaking on one hand and reading and writing on the other. Being able to do one does not mean you can do the other and vice

versa. Some people (and quite a few native French speakers, I might add) can have long conversations with all and sundry, but are not very good when it comes to writing. Much more often with foreign language learners though, someone may be able to write very nicely, and read newspapers and novels in the foreign language, but when they want to talk to some-one, nothing comes out! They might even have taken the precaution of preparing something in advance to say at the boulangerie (bakery), which comes out faultlessly but engenders a reply which they cannot even begin to understand.

When you practise talking and listening you get better at talking and listening, and when you practise reading and writing you get better at reading and writing. Not surprisingly, practising one thing doesn't necessarily have any noticeable effect on the other. So when time is limited you have to make choices, and the reality is that the more time you spend in class on reading and writing, the less time you will spend on talking and listening and vice versa.

It's also true that learning to talk needs much more practise than learning to read and write. Everything happens very fast and unless you're used to the pace, and used to improvising with whatever you've got available, everything will pass you by. You do not have time to fully engage your thought processes, as you do when you read and write, so you need to have a few automatic responses to fall back on to give you some extra time. You can only achieve this by practise, practise, practise! The relationship between listening and speaking on one hand and reading and writing on the other is an interesting topic which you can read about in more detail in **Section II of "The Little language Learning Guide" - Learning to speak and the place of reading and writing in your course.**

If you have a strong preference to learn either speaking and listening on one hand or reading and writing on the other, you need to find out how much emphasis is placed on each, to decide whether a particular class is right for you. If I were answering this question about my own classes, I would say that I only use reading and writing as a tool for recording speech, for instance writing on the board, taking notes and so on and to function in a 21st century environment - reading important notices and signs, and writing very minimally.

My view is that we only have a short time every week and that is best used almost exclusively for talking and listening. People can always do writing and reading practice at home from books if they want to improve those things. I also tend to give listening and speaking tasks as homework, rather than reading and writing. However other teachers take other approaches, so be careful to find out what your teacher's views are. I think I can safely say, though that most adult education classes at beginner to intermediate levels place the emphasis on the spoken language, while including differing amounts of reading/writing practice.

Grammar

Another of your school memories might be vocabulary lists, verb tenses and lists of different verb endings, grids with different pronouns marked on them and so on. You probably had exercise books full of them. A lot of people found all this confusing, concluded they would never learn the language and gave up. Take heart if you are one of these people! You don't have to study grammar to be able to start communicating with people in a foreign language. Just as you learnt to speak your own language without charts and tables, so you can learn a new one without them.

Most adult education classes focus on communicating in the language and you don't need to study grammar in its own right to do this. Grammar study usually involves consulting charts or tables showing all the possible things you **could** say in different sets of circumstances. Different people learn languages in different ways, and some people find it confusing to see all the theoretical things they **could** say in a chart, they just want to remember one thing that they can say in a particular context, and move on to learn the others at a later stage. However there are others who like to see how everything fits together once they have become familiar with several different forms for saying something and these people might find grammatical charts a useful reference point. As an analogy take the example of different approaches people might have to medical treatment. While some people who go to the doctor just want to take the medicine or treatment recommended and get better, others want to know exactly how a medicine or treatment works to make them better. People are likely to get better (or not!) just as well with or without the explanation, but some people like to have it, and others find it confusing and a waste of time!

Because of this many adult education teachers do provide a grammatical explanation as an optional learning tool for people who find it helpful, but they usually do so after you have practised a particular language item for quite a while in quite a number of different circumstances, have become familiar with some of the forms and can use it talking to people. The full grammatical explanation is an optional extra for those who find it helpful. In my opinion it is unlikely to help you speak better but it might make you feel better!

Finding our “language legs”

The most important thing to do if you want to “get talking” in the new language is to practise talking as much as possible. Unfortunately many of us have had drummed into us that we must avoid making mistakes at all costs. What this sometimes means is that we would rather say nothing than make a mistake (forget a word, pronounce something wrong, get muddled up or just go blank, for instance). Or perhaps we would rather work out our sentence very carefully in advance so that we get it right when we say it.

There is a big flaw in this way of thinking. No-one that I have ever heard of outside of the Tower of Babel ever learnt a language without making mistakes, and that includes our own native language. Mistakes are a necessary part of the process of acquiring a language. If you don't go through this stage, you won't learn. If you keep saying only those things that you already know very well you will never build up your skills. And if you say nothing at all you will not learn the language. So you **MUST** make mistakes. You can read more about this in Section II - *Intermediate stages - making mistakes – a different perspective* and *Making mistakes – changing your attitude*

Your class

An important part of the teacher's job is to get you talking. Once you are talking you are practising and are on the first rung of the ladder to improving your spoken language. This is one of the most difficult parts of the teacher's job, and is the bit which distinguishes the good from the not-so-good teacher. Lots of people can speak your foreign language, tell you how to say things, think of exercises to give you, explain how things work and give you information about the language and the culture of the country. Not so many can get you talking.

A good teacher will find as many ways as possible to get you to talk in class- sometimes you'll just be talking to one person with no-one else listening, to get your confidence up, sometimes you'll be speaking to the teacher in class, sometimes you'll be speaking to another student in class or listening to others speaking. Your teacher will talk as much as possible at your level in the foreign language, not just at set times but at any time when anything is said. Sometimes she will explain in English afterwards if she sees you are not understanding, but she will get you into the habit from the very beginning, of everything being in the foreign language if at all possible. This will include telling you how to say things that come up in class, or you will need a lot - "pass these round please", "what doesmean" "how do you spell that?" "sorry I'm late", "do you mind if I open the window?" and making sure you use them once you know them and don't lapse into English if you are capable of saying something in the foreign language!!

Having read this, you might be getting nervous about talking in front of other people and making mistakes that everyone can hear. As adults it's normal for us to feel apprehensive about being thought stupid, slow, saying something silly and so on and we aren't used to talking when we are not fully in control and know exactly what we are talking about. This is why it's very important indeed that you feel comfortable in your class and with your classmates. You need to feel that no-one is judging you when you have a go, and that everyone is in the same boat, then if the atmosphere is relaxed things become fun, and mistakes add spice to the proceedings! It's part of the teacher's job to create this sort of supportive, relaxed atmosphere in the class, so that you can all thrive and feel at home.

Taking stock of your progress

Authorities who run language classes for adults are very keen on evaluations and assessments, understandably perhaps since they are spending money on them and want to know they are working. They want a measure that tells them that the students have learnt something. Learners also have an interest in taking stock of how they are progressing but for completely different reasons. It is easy to get discouraged when we put a lot of effort into something and don't seem to be getting anywhere. If we can see we have made progress it spurs us on to keep at it.

The problem is that what suits a government statistical analysis doesn't always suit an adult learner, so you, as the learner, need to find out what sort of assessment is involved in your course. You will find that some language courses are assessed by examination-style methods. While these are much less invasive and intimidating than school-style exams and based on more realistic things you might want to do in the language, they still measure you against a pre-determined set of tasks that you have to complete within the time-frame of the course. In other words you are being measured up to an outside standard and have to meet deadlines. Everyone in your class will be measured up to the same outside standard in the same time-frame, so ultimately your progress is being measured in relation to other people and outside standards.

This is not how most adult learners like to take stock of their progress. They want to know whether they have improved on their own performance, not how they compare with some-one else's. Informally assessed courses allow the teacher to set up a set of measurements which is much more personal to the student, while still conforming to the authority's need to come up with "achievement" statistics

You will find that some language classes are “accredited” which means they have exams attached which you have to do. Others are not “accredited” – you **are** assessed, but much more informally by the teacher, according to what she feels is right for her class. Certain courses allow you to elect to do an exam or outside assessment if you want to, but don’t require you to take part. Bear in mind though, that the teacher will probably base at least some of the teaching around what is required for those students who are intending to take the exam. You may well feel it is important to find out about this aspect of your course before enrolling.

Language learning and you

There are lots of different reasons for wanting to learn a language, and it’s important to sort out what yours are. Having read up to this point you will have thought whether you want mostly to talk, or if you have some other important considerations, like, say, reading the newspaper, or writing letters, and you will be aware of the different ways of assessing your progress.

Finding the right level

The next thing to think about is finding a class that is at the right level for you. You will know if you are a complete beginner, but further than that the best approach is to talk to your teacher who will have a lot of experience of judging what seems to be the best class for you. Most teachers are very happy to talk to potential students **before** the beginning of a course as it means they have more chance of having the right students in the right classes from the outset.

Among the factors she will take into account and ask you about are what previous language learning experience you have of the language you are going to learn **and any others**, and how much exposure you have had to the new language on holiday, with family or any other connections you may have with speakers of the language. She needs to know not only approximately where you are at present, but also factors which might mean you are likely to learn much faster than others who start at your level, like, for instance being a competent speaker of another foreign language, or having spent time in the country where the new language is spoken. Another judgement she will have to make is where to place you if you have done a lot of academic study of the language in the past, at school for instance, but your speaking ability is at beginner level.

If you are hesitating about contacting the teacher, via the authority running the course, because you want to keep a low profile, or because you think you might be a nuisance, take the plunge! A good teacher will be delighted to have the chance of avoiding problems in the future by making sure that you start off in the best class for you and will welcome chatting to you in advance. It can be very distracting and distressing both for you as a student and for your teacher to go going through a few weeks or even months in a class if you do not feel comfortable because the level or approach is wrong for you.

Over the years many of the problems I have had with students being in the wrong group would not have come up if I had had a chance to chat to them beforehand. This is particularly true of students who **think** they want to go back to the beginning and have a fresh start, or more advanced students who **think** they want to go into an improvers (second year) group to get to grip with basics. It may be many many years since they “did” the language and they imagine that because they are so “rusty” they will be on a par with genuine beginners or genuine

“improvers”. However, when after a couple of weeks find that things are starting to come back they get annoyed with their classmates who really are at the beginning or really are at the improver level and need much more time to work through things. Not only that, but their classmates rapidly become aware that someone else in the group is much more advanced than they are and get discouraged. This is not to say that the arrangement can never work of course. It can work if the more advanced student is aware in advance and accepts that they will have to be patient, and scale down their expectations to the level of the group they are joining, and if the rest of the group feels comfortable with the presence of a more advanced learner, but more often than not it is a recipe for discontent.

What will be asked of you in your language class

While preparing to start your new course it is helpful to be aware of what will be asked of you, which you may not have thought about. The most important point is that once you are in a class, you are not going to just “be taught”. You are preparing to engage, with the assistance of your teacher and your group, in an activity, which you will have to devote time and energy to. If you are hoping to “take a back seat” you should consider changing to a different subject because language learning is hands-on. There are no back seats! If you are not prepared to have a go and get involved you won’t learn to talk, and if you don’t mind about not learning to talk you should join a different sort of class. I have to be brutal here because having a silent presence in a language group can be offputting for the others in the group. They are less willing to “lay themselves on the line” when not everybody else is seen to be going through the same thing. This doesn’t mean that if you prefer to take a back seat you can’t enjoy your language it’s just that you need to find a like-minded group, perhaps primarily interested in literature or cultural matters.

Secondly in order to practise talking, there has to be something to talk about in the group, and for a large part this means talking about ourselves, our lives, our surroundings and so on, since at beginner and intermediate level we are not in a position to discuss world politics or views on topical issues, even if we wanted to! If you are a very private person it is possible you might find this intrusive, and for this reason many teachers offer the possibility of inventing whatever you feel like just to talk. However there is a push towards talking about your daily life, family and so on which should be aware of before you sign up. Again if this is not “you” you should seek out a group with a different emphasis.

Overall, I think that the most important factor in whether you end up making progress in your language is whether you come to classes regularly, don’t drop out at the first hurdle and keep it up. I can safely say that this usually boils down to whether or not you have a good time in your classes, and whether the group you are in is fun, supportive and fairly lighthearted in approach. If it is you’ll look forward to going and not want to miss out on getting together with your friends and having a good time. This one aspect often sees people through the rocky periods in their language learning, or in their life outside the classroom which might make it more difficult for them to keep coming!

Here is a checklist of questions you might want to ask before deciding on a course. I have indicated when something come down to a person’s own preference and when in my view a particular answer is desirable! Of course you do not have to agree with me!!

1. Can you chat with the teacher before signing up, to see if the level and approach are right for you? (This should be a “yes” in my view. Be a bit wary if the answer is “no”!)
2. Roughly how many students will there be in the class? (In my view an optimum class size would be about 8-10 students)
3. Will you get lots of opportunities to practise talking? (The answer really ought to be “yes”!)
4. How much emphasis placed on speaking and listening, and on reading and writing? (Your own preference)
5. What is the place of grammar in the course – quite important, or used only as backup to speaking? (Again, your own preference)
6. Is class business done as much as possible in the new language with English used as a backup to make sure everyone understands? (I think, “yes”)
7. If the answer to this is “yes”, will you be given the opportunity to ask in English if you don’t understand anything? (Answer here should be “yes” in my view)
8. Will there be any assessment? If so will it be a formal assessment, or will you and your teacher review your progress in an informal way? (Your preference)

This article is the first part of **“Little Language Learning Guide”** for beginners and seasoned language learners covering all aspects of the language learning experience.